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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIJING 001884

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/20/2032

TAGS: PGOV PHUM KCUL SOCI CH

SUBJECT: INTERNET ADDICTION SCARE IN CHINA REVEALS DEEPER  
OFFICIAL CONCERNS

REF: A. BEIJING 1238

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Classified By: Political Section Internal Unit Chief Susan A. Thornton.  
Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

11. (C) The perils of "Internet addiction" have been a hot human interest story in Mainland media in recent weeks, as newspapers and (of course) Internet news sites run a steady diet of cautionary tales about youths losing their way thanks to too much time online. The Ministry of Culture has announced that no new Internet cafes will be allowed to open for the remainder of 2007. Despite the public health risk theme the "addiction" coverage presents, media and academic contacts maintain that the problem is exaggerated -- and the Government likes it that way. While online games, not progressive political blogs, are seen as most guilty of seducing young people, any scare that steers kids clear of a medium many officials see as a gateway to a trove of subversive material that threatens Party authority is a bonus. While the Propaganda Department has issued no specific coverage guidelines, contacts said the Ministries of Education and Culture are working in tandem to get the story out on the hazards of the Internet. Cybercafe managers, however, brushed aside the concerns, commenting that being hooked on the web is "no worse than watching too much television." End Summary.

They've Got a Habit

12. (C) The Chinese press has coined a catchy new term to describe people who can not tear themselves away from the world wide web that translates roughly as "netaholics." The official China Youth Internet Association released a report in 2006 pegging the number of young Internet users (defined as age 13-35) addicted to the web at more than 13 percent. In the past month, the press has run dozens of articles recounting scary tales of young people veering off the rails thanks to being hooked on the Internet. One piece, on The Beijing Times website, tells of 17-year-old Little Ying, who reportedly ran away from home and spent 20 days eating and sleeping in an Internet cafe. Another article on the Beijing Daily's website, under the headline "Internet Addicted Youth Are Most Likely to Oppose Society," quotes a series of academics who charge that too much time online promotes deviant behavior and harms performance at school. Online and print media reported that National People's Congress

representatives discussed the issue during its annual legislative confab that ended March 16. Finally, under its health section, the People's Daily Online ran an editorial March 13 arguing that the key to rehabilitating "Internet addicts" is first sensitizing parents to the problem.

¶3. (C) Despite the public health gloss the media is giving the fight against "Internet addiction," the propaganda push serves the purposes of a Government that remains very skeptical of the Internet, said Li Qiang (protect), Dean of the School of Sociology at Tsinghua University. The vast majority of Chinese

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netizens use the Internet for entertainment and business. Violent online games, not progressive political blogs, are seen as most guilty of hooking young people and prompting them to behave badly. But any scare that steers kids clear of a medium many officials see as a gateway to a trove of subversive material that threatens Party authority is a bonus, Li reasoned. (Note: Official statistics released in January indicate that the number of Chinese netizens rose 23.4 percent in 2006 to 137 million, although the real figure is probably higher. In addition, some 20 million individuals have launched personal web logs online, according to the official China Internet Network Information Center. End note.)

Log On, Tune In, Don't Drop Out

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¶4. (C) Li contended that China's top leadership realizes that the Internet is the future in terms of how people get information about trends and events. Against this backdrop, there are currently two Chinas,

BEIJING 00001884 002 OF 003

one in which people rely on newspapers for their news and one whose citizens go first to the Internet. The latter group is growing quickly, and the Government is worried about young people having too much exposure to information that might cause them to question the Party's authority -- be it on media issues, history or current events. Blogs, discussion forums and other sites offer an array of material not available in print media, and some of it is politically sensitive. Although the Government wants people to use the Internet for education and business activity, officials fret that people might use their unprecedented power to express themselves in a way that might harm social stability, such as by stimulating a movement or organizing a protest. The anti-Japan protests of 2005 were a wake-up call in this regard, Li said.

¶5. (C) The ban on new Internet cafes is a symbolic move that will not diminish young people's desire to surf the web or play games, said Ding Xueliang (protect), Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's fledgling Beijing office (currently under the umbrella of the China Reform Forum). In addition, it will have a minimal effect on their ability to log on, especially as more and more families are able to afford personal computers. But the Central Government directive barring new cafes will have a negative trickle down effect through the system, Ding predicted, observing that especially when it comes to rules that relate to stability or media controls, provincial and local governments will err on the side of getting tough. It could also translate into closures of existing cafes in some areas. Leaders at all levels want to impress superiors in the run-up to the 17th Party Congress and they know being lax on Internet and media issues is no way to score

points, Ding related.

Scaring Parents

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¶6. (C) Propaganda authorities have handed down no specific guidelines on coverage of "Internet addiction" issues or the ban on new cybercafes, said Zhou Qing'an, an Internet-savvy professor at the Tsinghua University School of Journalism and

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Communications. The Government has deployed considerable technical and personnel resources in its effort to contain the Internet. The State Council Information Office has issued rule after rule, Zhou observed, but enforcement is lax and the firewall remains porous. While there is no concerted effort by the Propaganda Department or other information agencies to launch a comprehensive campaign against "Internet addiction," Zhou, who has contacts in the media regulatory world, said officials told him the Ministries of Education and Culture are working in tandem to get the story out. He gave no further details, but added that as two of the more than 20 ministries charged with what the Government calls "managing" the Internet, they view the effort as fulfilling their role in shoring up defenses against harmful content.

¶7. (C) Demographics play a role in the Government's approach, Zhou related, remarking that in the view of Propaganda guardians, "you can not change the thinking of someone over 30, but you can still influence those under 30." Sociologist Li separately made a similar point, commenting that given the Government's failure so far to ensure that only content it deems appropriate makes it through the filters, one objective of the "Internet addiction" thrust is to enlist parents in the fight -- by scaring them into monitoring their children more closely. Referring to China's test-heavy system of educational advancement, Li emphasized that "if you want to motivate Chinese parents against the Internet, just tell them it is affecting their children's studies."

"It's No Worse Than TV"

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¶8. (C) The media has portrayed Internet cafes as bastions of crime and seediness. In fact, Beijing's cybersalons do tend to be tucked in smoky basements next to billiards parlors or video game arcades. The dreary underground corridor leading to one typical establishment in Beijing's bustling Tuanjiehu neighborhood is lined with posters cautioning patrons

BEIJING 00001884 003 OF 003

about the dangers of gambling and unsafe sex. (Note: Beijing has instituted a rule prohibiting minors under 18 from entering Internet cafes. End note.) Nonetheless, managers at Internet cafes brushed aside the recent publicity onslaught and the restriction on new openings. Yu Tiancheng, who manages a basement Internet cafe, said he has had no problem with crime during the year he has worked there, although he complained that patrons regularly flout the no smoking rule. Yu said his cafe is always busy and is particularly packed after schools and offices let out in the evening. He downplayed the negative effects of spending a lot of time online. "It is no worse than watching too much television," he remarked.

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